

The future of IC: Riding the Waves or Into the Wilderness?

By Alison Boothby

There is no doubt that communicators face some big challenges at the moment. Digital innovation is creating an ever-changing communications landscape and, against this backdrop, Comma Partners recently gathered senior communication specialists to debate the future of their profession in a lively, fun and thought-provoking session.

“When looking at the future of IC it’s really a matter of perspective,” says Paul Osgood, who is the global internal communication lead for law firm Clifford Chance. Speaking at the event, he stressed that: “Whether optimistic or pessimistic, unless we look at both the opportunities and the threats presented by the new digital era, we will struggle to remain relevant and valuable.”

So what are some of the issues we need to consider?

Communications reach

The encouragement of conversation and the easy enablement of dialogue are obvious consequences of the digital revolution along with an ability to generate large volumes of high quality content and share it at speed. The optimist sees just how easy it is to reach more people than ever before, wherever they are, whatever they are doing, on any device, at any time and in any part of the world. Communicating with traditionally hard to reach employees is increasingly the norm and it’s straightforward with a mobile first approach. Fragmented workforces feel more involved, engagement increases and everyone is happy. Feedback is constantly available and measurement opportunities are pretty much endless – there is data on everything. Happy days. Yet, for those with a more pessimistic outlook, things may not look so rosy: there’s never a time to be ‘off the clock’ as it were, and who knows just how far those corporate messages are going and what may be being shared, unwittingly, in the public domain? With an overload of analysis and available data, to be honest, it’s a pretty confusing picture. There is only so much feedback that can be digested. It’s all just too much.

Audience maturity

Paul Osgood again: “With four generations in the workplace, it is a challenging time. But an interesting one too. Older millennials are starting to engage with new millennials which is great news and a positive dynamic. But the challenge is that we still have to manage the long tail of boomers and Gen X who tend to view comms rather differently than their younger colleagues. Digital communications, and especially enterprise wide social media, are changing the face of our industry. I’m amazed that organisations have been so passive in their approach to adoption of digital communications. My experience tells me that pro-active management and engagement with digital communications delivers positive outcomes for those who are brave enough to take on the challenge.”



Andrew Morrison, a strategic communications consultant, agrees that organisations have to get better at understanding how their employees expect to be communicated with. It used to be that corporates were at the forefront of technology (remember those Blackberry days?) but now the reverse is true and consumer tech is (generally) leading the way. There's a clear expectation that communication is two-way, opinions are freely voiced and emotional reactions shared. "In short, we need to adapt or die," he said. "As communicators we can't justify a strategic position if all we do is push messages through traditional channels. We need to understand employee-centric comms and that has to include adoption of digital comms. It's an expectation of the employee experience."

In consumer life people want stories and want to be part of stories, with experiences to share and memories to keep. Why would work be any different? The drivers for engagement are the same – respect, recognition – people want to matter. As Andrew Morrison reminds us: "The digital revolution is not just something going on in a sub-culture deep within the organisation: it is the way forward and leaders with real vision can see this. Success through people means they have to adopt these latest technologies to give people the employee experience they desire."

Investment

With employees increasing their digital IQ through their daily lives and the rapid expansion of consumer-style tech for business, it has never been easier to 'go digital'. Barriers to entry are low: gone are the days of expensive customised builds; hello plug -in- and -play. Social intranets and digital workplaces are all the rage. According to recent research with [Crowdscope](#), the vast majority of larger enterprises (71%) have a social network of some kind and figures from the Intranet Benchmarking Forum show that from those who have a network around 38% are getting value from it. If you're not yet convinced that there's something going on that you need to take notice of, look at the success that Workplace by Facebook has had in the past year. Even Yammer is getting some good press these days and not merely because it's free as part of the Microsoft O365 stack.

If you are a pessimist though, you may hanker after the highly customised, bespoke solution where nothing happened until it was perfect. Surely streamlining corporate wish lists of communication desires gives us faceless, anodyne and homogenous solutions? And as technology moves further ahead, we can optimistically view the low cost of upgrading or replacing as a bonus. Or perhaps you'll bemoan the half-life of the channel you were just getting to grips with...

Paul Osgood's straightforward advice: "Digital capabilities are simply unrecognisable from just a few years ago and we have to keep up."

Communication integration

On the positive side, the speed and efficiency of sharing information has made it much easier to work alongside colleagues on employee engagement and change programmes – a long-overdue and



necessary integration for many IC specialists. Sophie Rena, an ex-journalist and now an engagement and change communications consultant, feels that the evolving IC discipline has come a long way in the last decade. “Our job is to support good quality communications in any part of the organisation, and we are increasingly moving to a change comms and an engagement comms function. I think the fact that we are always supporting broader strategic initiatives, rather than ‘owning’ them, is one of the reasons we find it so hard to gain the recognition we crave – and we certainly haven’t cracked the ROI question!”

It would certainly be helpful if we could agree what the purpose of IC was. Are we about creating engagement, encouraging meritocratic dialogue through changing times? Making sure everyone is on board with vision, values and purpose? If this is indeed the case, the loss of the more personal, local and bespoke communications crafted by our own fair hands is a price worth paying if our line-management colleagues are better enabled to communicate well.

Jen Wilson, global communications consultant and a specialist in complex, regulated sectors including biotech and pharmaceuticals, has no concerns over the future for professional communicators: We’re needed more than ever as we’re moving to what I think is aptly described as a crisis of attention, recently linked by the Bank of England to Britain’s declining productivity. The battle for attention from an explosion of channels means constant interruptions during the working day. We might think we’re good at multitasking but recent research from the University of California, Irvine suggests it takes us up to 25 minutes to refocus on a task each time we’re distracted. According to the New Scientist this ‘info-mania’ reduces our IQ more than smoking marijuana! With the increasing adoption of social media at work this problem is only going to get worse. At the same time, the need to engage with employees will be greater as we evolve to agile, project based working. All of this means that IC professionals will be more in demand than ever to support businesses in communicating effectively in this complex setting.”

Sophie Rena picks up this point: “Given the authority comms can deliver, it is a strategic role and should become increasingly so, as good strategic comms give employees/workers a clear line of sight and aligns them with the goals, vision, values and business strategy of an organisation. This will be even more important – and tougher – in an increasingly gig economy. As communication professionals we will need to demonstrate the strong cross-functional relationships that help deliver these objectives.”

Communication roles

Like it or not, digital innovation has already changed our role. No longer are we the crafters and purveyors of fine messages. In many (one may hope most) cases we are no longer ghost writing messages from the C-suite as ‘authenticity’ is the expected norm. Perhaps we see ourselves as content curators, rather than drafters; we are digital aggregators and collaboration ninjas. We certainly have our ear to the ground and are well placed to advise senior management on how key strategic messages are landing. “We are a voice of reason, good at listening to what’s really going on,” says Andrew



Morrison. “We should have the ear of the organisation which is vitally important for culture change and change comms in general. If we get too institutionalised it’s hard to ride the waves and harder to be objective. Interims have a huge benefit in this regard.”

Olga Klimanovich, change and communications consultant, facilitator and executive coach, agrees: “It’s our job to get the leaders’ ear and help them translate the vision, values, business objectives and strategic messages to the organisation. It’s also our job to help them create the right culture in which success follows.” There is plenty of evidence from the likes of HBR, Towers Watson, McKinsey etc that there is a correlation between good IC, high employee engagement and a positive employee experience, so positioning ourselves as employee experience experts seems a sensible way to go. “We are more than wordsmiths and writers – if we focus on how we support the strategy we will ride the waves. If we get bogged down in tactical stuff, we will continue to be marginalised. In stressful times we tend to be very active in our *comfort* zone – and this is tactical. We have to stay in our *uncomfort* zone and resist the temptation to be the producers - everyone else thinks they are good at comms so let’s make sure they are good at it and let them do the tactical communicating!” she suggests.

Into the future

At the end of the evening’s debate, the mood was generally optimistic for the future of IC, but only if we are prepared to adapt to the ever-changing landscape. For Emma Ridgeon: “It was stimulating and terrifying in equal measure to justify the role of IC in the face of a fairly robust challenge by my respected peers, but I do think it was an important wake-up call for us all, particularly in terms of determining how we remain relevant to the business. The clients I’ve worked with over the past few years are facing unprecedented change, so equipping managers and helping to develop that resilience remains key for me, as well as developing the skills to reach a much broader demographic.”

Fundamentally communications is an ongoing dialogue with the aim of getting people to understand, feel and do things differently or better; it’s about channelling feelings, *nudging* them to make certain choices and take certain action. Jen Wilson expands on this point: “We’re learning more all the time about how to apply the principles of behavioural science to positively change behaviour, and we see this successfully deployed in large scale government campaigns, for example to increase organ donation. The results are phenomenal, and I think there’s an opportunity to provide the same scientific rigour when developing internal engagement and change strategy. When we can really start to add metrics to what we do, to show that an intervention has changed how people behave at work, then that’s when the magic happens, and IC will become central to how an organisation manages its biggest asset.”

For Virginia Hicks, founder of Comma Partners, the evening’s debate certainly highlighted in particular the need for greater scientific rigour and improved metrics to influence stakeholders on the value of internal communications. “Technology is driving changes across society and we have a lot to learn from



the millennials who are maturing in management now. In a few years' time we will have forgotten many of the challenges we have today which are very much focussed on the digital workplace revolution. The pessimists may see that IC will always be on trial. As an optimist I am confident that we will continue to evolve as a function getting to the heart of organisations and the motivations of people, helping give meaning and purpose to their work. But being able to prove that we are adding value remains a priority.”

Paul Osgood is a senior internal communications specialist who is the global internal communications lead for the law firm, Clifford Chance. Last year he advised BG Group, a global exploration and production and LNG company, during their acquisition by Shell. Previously, Paul was Global Head of Internal Communications at Philips, Director of Communications at Colt Group, a Partner at Brunswick Group and provided strategic internal communication advice to clients for Hewitt Associates.

Comma Partners provides internal and change communications specialists to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com

Alison Boothby is a freelance business writer specialising in change, communication, engagement and topical workplace issues.

